

# I

‘First off, the sky goes dark.’

‘Of course it does.’

‘Then they come out the ground and, if you’re a certain type of person, drag you under, where your body is consumed.’

They got to the gate of the pen and Kate opened it, letting her brother through first.

‘And I’m guessing you are that type of person,’ he said.

She slid the bolt back across while he ran ahead, his boots squelching in the mud. Walking on, she watched him duck under the low roof, slapping the wooden joist with his free hand as he went inside the shelter. At eleven years old, her brother awoke every day buzzing. Everything he saw in these first few hours – the gravestones of pets, log piles, frost – deserved a high five.

‘I’m gonna milk the face off you,’ Albert told the goats. ‘I’m going to milk you to death.’

He did resemble a trainee grim reaper, she thought, in his deep-hooded navy poncho, carrying a bucket to collect fresh souls. Following him into the shelter, she sat on a low stool next to Belona – her favourite goat, a four-year-old Alpine with white legs and a black comma-shaped beard – who was against the back wall with her neck tied. She stamped her hooves as she ate from her feed pan. Belona was notoriously difficult in the mornings; this was part of her and Kate’s affinity.

Albert was talking as he milked. ‘. . . so she has this massive picture of what’s at the centre of the universe and it’s basically a pair of eyes – two huge evil eyes . . .’

Kate tried not to listen. She squeezed, tugged, closed her fingers from index to pinkie and focused on the noise of milk on metal; the sound slowly deadened as the bucket filled. She put her ear against

Belona's side and listened to the gurgling innards. The swell and slump of the goat's breathing.

'... and research shows, you'll have to wave bye-bye to gravity and time and university and ...'

*'Albert.'*

He stopped talking but she knew his speech continued, unbroken, inside his head. She started to get a rhythm going, two-handed, fingers finally warming. Her brother, meanwhile, played his goat like an arcade machine.

'One nil,' he said, as he picked up his bucket and stool, and moved to the other side of the divider. He put a feed pan in front of Babette and she immediately dug in.

Belona started battling a little, her legs jerking, clanging against the bucket. With her knuckles, Kate stroked the tassels that hung from the goat's jaw and, leaning over, whispered to her.

'What are you saying?'

*'Nothing.'*

'Are you in love with Belona? That's okay if you are. Mum and Dad won't mind. They're totally easy with whatever. They just want you to be in a loving relationship.'

Belona kicked and the bucket tipped – spilling half the milk on to the mud and straw. Kate's jaw tightened.

Her brother, through years of collecting words from international visitors to the community, had compiled an armoury of exotic insults. He tutted and proceeded to call her something bad in Bengali.

It was just getting light. There was the smell of hay and shit. Hooves skittered on the stones. Outside the gloomy hut she could see the rain still coming down in the pen, filling the holes left by their boots.

Back at the yard, Albert poured his milk into a dented churn. Spots of mud and dirt camouflaged themselves among the freckles on his face. His right earhole, she noticed, held a cache of grit. She often tried to convince him that it was a duty, as someone brought up in a community, to battle stereotypes by maintaining, as she did, exceptional levels of hygiene. Albert wasn't interested. He longed

to summon a bodily stench, regularly checking his armpits and foreskin – waiting for the big day – taking wafts from his fingertips like a sommelier testing a vintage.

She waited, then said ‘tick’, which was the signal. He looked at her, blinked – said ‘tock’ – then ran, letting the empty bucket clang on the brick.

They sprinted round the front of the house, skidding on gravel, in through the open double doors, up the wide stairs, side by side, a trail of mud across the landing, up more stairs and into the large shared bathroom. She was too old for this, but without her, she doubted he would ever get clean. They raced to undress.

Kate sat on the bench and yanked off her muddy boots, then peeled away her socks. Unbuttoning her jeans, she let them pool at her feet. Albert was kneeling, working determinedly at his laces, which he had finally learned to tie, but too well. Kate turned away from him and pulled her jumper and T-shirt off in one, uncovering three well-tended spots in the centre of her chest and, despite her posture that tried to hide them, and a bra designed to downplay them, her breasts. Albert, seeing that his sister was already down to her underwear, became a frenzy of pushing and tugging, kicking at his boots, getting his hoodie stuck on his head, a line-caught trout, flapping on the tiles. She sat on the bench and pulled down her thermal long johns and knickers in a crouch. Kate’s shoulder-length hair was the red colour of late-stage rust, though the box had called it ‘vampiric’. She dyed her pubic hair too. Unclipping her bra, she stepped over Albert, who was just getting free of his boots, and slipped under the shower head, spun the tap-wheel to starboard. The applause of water rushing over her. Silt and mud and hay ran in clockwise swirls towards the plug.

‘Go back to Velcro,’ she said.

The creature responded in Malay.

Finally Albert yanked off his jumper and wriggled out of his trousers and pants. Kate blinked at his skinny, china-white body, full complement of visible ribs, hip bones sharp as flints, glowing knees, dick like a popped balloon.

‘Cold, cold, cold,’ he said and, getting to his feet, launched himself

under the water. Kate, with a matador's grace, took a step back and raised her arms to avoid making contact with him. He hopped from foot to foot in the steam. His goosebumps sank. The water at their feet turned the colour of the liquid on top of Patrick's home-made yoghurt.

'Tick tock,' Albert said. 'How long have we got left?'

'A minute, maybe less.'

The community used a small, solar-powered, forty-litre water heater that gave up easily and now, in late April, would be overachieving if it got four people clean. When the shower 'turned' – channelling deep-chilled hill water – the screams of visiting backpackers could be heard from the bottom of the garden. Kate and Albert knew there was only time for pits and bits. No exfoliant, no conditioner.

'Not long left,' Kate said. 'You know what to do.'

Albert bowed his head. Squeezing out a palmful of egg yolk and oatmeal shampoo, she splatted it on his scalp, rubbed it around quickly then blasted him with the shower head.

'You're clear. Now me.' Kate doused her head under the water, then took a dollop of the grey shampoo and spread it on. 'We have a problem,' she said. 'No lather. Find the contraband.'

Hidden among the tall lotions and emollients huddled on a corner shelf at the back of the cubicle, Albert located a travel-size bottle of Pantene that one of the wwoofers had smuggled in.

The shampoo bloomed into froth on her scalp. Her brother watched the foam drift down her back, bum, legs. They started to feel the water temperature drop.

'How long?' he asked.

'Seconds.'

They began the countdown together.

'Five, four . . .'

Kate quickly dealt with her armpits.

' . . . three, two . . .'

They clambered out of the shower, soap-blind, feeling for the clothes rail, arms out like the undead, clamping towels around them just as the column of ice descended. Kate reached in and spun the tap off.